

ARIZONA VETERANS TASK FORCE

Wednesday, November 2, 2005 - 1:00 p.m.

Governor's 2nd Floor Conference Room

1700 W. Washington - Phoenix, AZ 85007

M I N U T E S

Call to Order

Chairman Pat Chorpenning called the meeting to order at 1:01 p.m.

Roll Call

The following members were present:

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| ➤ Patrick F. Chorpenning, Chair | ➤ Georganna Meyer |
| ➤ Joe P. Bibich | ➤ Joan E. Sisco |
| ➤ George J. Heaney | ➤ Gary M. Yaquinto |
| ➤ Avtar Khalsa | ➤ Caryn R. Walsh |
| ➤ Ezra Loring | |

Absent:

- Rebecca J. Phifer, Co-Chair
- Dora Schriro

Approval of Minutes

The minutes of the October 5, 2005 meeting were approved as written.

Opening Remarks

Chairman F. Chorpenning welcomed the Arizona Veterans Task Force Members and guests to the meeting. Mike Klier reviewed questions received since the last VTF meeting. One member said his questions were not included and Chairman Chorpenning assured him that his staff would research the problem.

Briefing – Arizona Army National Guard and Reserves (AzANG)

Gen. Greg Maxon made a presentation regarding the Army National Guard, but indicated that he did not include information about the Arizona Air National Guard or the Reserves. He indicated that the AzANG grew from 3800 in 1999 to over 4550 soldiers today. Nearly 2000 of the 3000 soldiers mobilized since 9/11 have been deployed overseas.

The Governor is the Commander-in-Chief for the AzANG and also for the Arizona Air National Guard. The Reserves are part of the US Department of Defense and its units are organized differently than by state borders. Gen. Maxon drew the distinction so that

attendees recognized that his presentation was strictly limited to the Army National Guard.

There have been 58 Purple Hearts¹ received by AzANG personnel in Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom. Reliance on the National Guard and Reserves is at its highest level in 60 years with no reduction in the foreseeable future. There is no anticipated date for the end of US troop involvement in Afghanistan or Iraq, but it will undoubtedly be several more years. The Global War on Terrorism planning horizon was presented as 25 to 30 years.

There are major differences between how the Reservists return from active duty and the process available to National Guard personnel. The Reservists face a week-long program where they are processed “back” from active duty. The Reservists are given a two-week leave upon return to the States; they return to the military installation to be “out-processed” with full access to medical and other services.

National Guard personnel are given the opportunity to extend their active duty to have a physical exam, or they can waive that right and return to their families more quickly. After returning to their homes, Guard personnel have a 90 day “honeymoon” period where they are not required to attend drills at their duty station. Often, the delay in meeting at their duty station is also a delay in counseling personnel about obtaining a physical exam at their earliest convenience and letting them know about benefits available to their families. Guard personnel frequently sign the waivers to leave immediately. When there is no physical examination at the time of discharge from active duty, Guard personnel may have difficulty obtaining certain medical benefits.

In the Phoenix area, the VA Regional Office and the Phoenix VA Medical Center have been actively supporting the efforts of troops returning from active duty. Recent data suggests that one out of every four service members returning from active duty overseas will require continuing medical/mental health care. Avtar Khalsa questioned some of the statistics presented. Gen. Maxon explained that federal government data collection is cumbersome and is frequently two years old when it is available. He is providing the most current information available to him at this time.

Gen. Maxon indicated that he was very grateful to the VA Regional Office for its role in coordinating service delivery to the Guard and Reserve personnel, with support from the Phoenix VA Medical Center. He thanked Sandy Flynn, the Phoenix VA Regional Office Director, and Jon Skelly, Assistant Director for the VARO, for their efforts.

Gen. Maxon they conducted a study to support a bill introduced last year regarding pay differential. He indicated that 20% of the National Guard were employed by the private sector and 18% are unemployed. The rest of the National Guard are employed as public servant (either employed as teachers or in government positions). There are federal laws that prohibit discrimination for Reserves and National Guard personnel, but there are still some obstacles for them. They frequently avoid telling potential employers about their status in the Guard or Reserves for fear that the employer will not hire them.

¹ Purple Hearts are awarded to military personnel who have been wounded in a combat zone.

Avtar Khalsa asked what the VTF should do to help returning troops get the benefits they have earned, especially in light of the probable longevity of the war. Gen. Maxon said that he believed having professional, VA-certified VBCs available would help immensely, especially in rural areas. The AzANG needs help for the soldiers and their families to navigate through the VA benefit process in obtaining their benefits.

Chairman Chorpenning reminded the Task Force there are nearly sixty recipients of the Purple Heart. After receiving an injury in a combat zone, they will undoubtedly qualify for some kind of disability payment. Recipients may be afraid that a disability claim might interfere with their ability to continue serving their country, and will not apply for disability benefits they have earned.

Native American Veterans Overview

The Arizona Veterans' Service Advisory Commission is comprised of 9 members appointed by the Governor. One of those members is Phillip Quochytewa, who is also a Council Member of the Hopi tribe. At the October meeting, the Advisory Commissioners discussed the unique needs of the American Indian veterans that differ from other ethnic groups within the veteran community.

There is a centuries-old tradition that requires warriors go through a purification process when they return to their tribes. These cultural differences, coupled with the various types of medical and mental health issues of the troops returning from active duty, make returning from active duty difficult for American Indian veterans. Chairman Chorpenning introduced Advisory Commissioner Phillip Quochytewa to the Veterans Task Force to present additional information.

Commissioner Quochytewa is the first American Indian to be appointed to serve on the Arizona Veterans' Service Advisory Commission. He provided a testimony of how the tribes were once a proud people who considered themselves stewards of the land. American Indians were not given the right to vote – even though they were fighting for their country during World War I and II – and suffered other indignities.

Commissioner Quochytewa believes that too little attention has been given to the American Indian veteran who has unique culture, ceremonies, and traditions that require consideration. Veterans on the reservations face increased issues with alcoholism, domestic violence, and suicide. The Veterans Benefits Counselors sent to the reservations to help veterans do not possess the abilities to adequately counsel that population. The extraordinary distances between reservations and VA Medical Centers makes access to VA health care extremely difficult. The aging veterans on the reservation have even more difficulty accessing VA health care.

The Arizona State legislature has not been as helpful to veterans as other states. On the federal level, there were profound cuts proposed to the US Department of Veterans Affairs budget. Thankfully, these radical budget cuts were reversed after the veteran community bitterly protested. The problems all seem to stem from lack of funding.

Chairman Chorpenning thanked the commissioner for his testimony. There are just under 180,000 American Indian in the military and nearly 10% of them live in Arizona. The Navajo Nation alone has more than 8000 veterans.

Questions: Caryn Walsh asked for clarification on why tribal members would not seek care after they have been through the purification process.

Answer: Tribes frequently rename the returning warrior in addition to other physical and ritualistic cleansing. There are sometimes clashes in cultures when veterans believe they have done something wrong when they continue to need medical and mental health support from the VA. The best solution is to create Veterans Benefits Counselors who are trained to process the VA claims and are sensitive to traditional healings, thereby helping veterans resolve their unique issues.

Questions: Caryn Walsh asked if they are visited by VA nurses who travel to remote locations statewide.

Answer: The VA has offered some outreach attempts with the tribes, but it is not adequate.

Question: Caryn Walsh asked if there is annual training available to individuals who provide counseling services on the reservation.

Answer: Chairman Chorpenning indicated there is a huge difference between a volunteer receiving week-long training once a year and a professional VA-certified Veterans Benefits Counselor. Blending the cultural aspects of the tribes and the ability to file claims is the only real answer to providing the American Indian veteran the support needed.

Chairman Chorpenning introduced Rep. Albert Tom who held a press conference earlier today regarding veterans issues on the reservation. Rep. Tom introduced the following individuals:

- Verland French (Salt-River Tribe), President of the Arizona Inter-Tribal Veterans Association,
- Larry Anderson (Vietnam veteran), Ft. Defiance – Navajo Nation Council Member
- Leroy Thomas, lawmaker (Vietnam veteran), Navajo Nation Council
- Noel Benoist (also referred to as an advisory and resource contact), National American Indian Veteran founding member and Arizona Inter-Tribal Veterans Association
- Cari James – Social Worker employed by the VA and volunteer with the Arizona Inter-Tribal Veterans Association
- Director Leo Chischilly, Manager of the Navajo Nation Dept. of Veterans Affairs
- Lawrence Oliver, Executive Director – Division of Human Resources of the Navajo Nation
- Honorable Dean Martin, Arizona Senate
- Honorable John Nelson, Chair of the Arizona House Counties, Municipalities and Military Affairs Committee
- Mike Roberts, Paralyzed Veterans of America – Phoenix Chapter
- Mike Pavatea – Director of Veterans Services – Hopi Guidance Center

Michael Pavatea asked to say a few words following Commissioner Quochytewa's testimony. He was medically retired from the service and was legally blind for 17 years.

Since he started the Hopi Veterans Services, it has changed from a paper-based program (purely filing claims) to a culturally-sensitive program. The Hopi Tribe has invested in a tribal office specifically for providing counseling to its veterans and it is a successful model for the type of counseling being proposed today.

Mr. Pavatea has a master's degree in counseling and works closely with the veterans to provide the kinds of services that Commissioner Quochoyewa spoke of today. He said that the Arizona Veterans Inter-Tribal Veterans Association is very interested in obtaining services for the various tribes. He related a story of the Prescott VA Medical Center was proposing a clinic in Show Low when the tribe much preferred placement in Holbrook.

Mr. Pavatea believes that the American Inter-Tribal Veterans Association is an excellent forum for identifying problems and solutions facing veterans on the reservations such as travel needs for veterans on reservations. There are significant costs in getting to and from VA clinics and he sees it as the most critical obstacle to receiving VA health care.

Chairman Chorpenning introduced Mike Pavatea to Mike Fugate, Arizona Department of Veterans Services – Office of Education. He wanted these two individuals to spend some time together, since both are focused on educational opportunities for veterans.

Honorable Larry Anderson, Navajo Nation Council Member, requested to speak. He served as a Marine in Vietnam, sits on the Human Service Council on the Navajo Nation, is married to a Hopi woman, and they have four children. He was very dismayed by the membership of this body since he saw only two American Indian people at the table today out of 21 tribes. He was very disturbed by the fact that native people aren't able to use their own language when receiving education. He also mentioned that there is no cemetery on the reservation where they can bury their loved ones.

Chairman Chorpenning said that he has the statutory authority to establish subcommittees as the Director of the Arizona Department of Veterans' Services. He invited Mr. Anderson to participate on a subcommittee focused on American Indian veterans and will have him work with someone from the agency regarding the committee to be formed.

Chairman Chorpenning distributed a briefing that was prepared by the Department of Navajo Veterans Affairs for the Arizona Veterans Taskforce. He also introduced Lynette Evans, Policy Advisor to the Governor on Regulatory Affairs and liaison with the National Association of Governors.

State Veteran Benefits Comparison

Chairman Chorpenning introduced Fred Ferguson, Deputy Director of the Arizona Department of Veterans' Services, who is also the recipient of the Congressional Medal of Honor. It is the highest award given by the US Government, approved by Congress and presented by the President of the United States.

Deputy Director Ferguson introduced Luella Emmons, Assistant Deputy Director. She conducted a thorough study to identify services provided to veterans in Arizona as compared to other states. That study was the basis for some of today's presentation.

The state of Wisconsin created a program called "I Owe You" where they added Veterans Benefits Counselors and significantly increased the amount of VA funding from \$721 million to over \$1 billion. If the requested 40 new VBCs were hired, Arizona would also increase the VA and other federal dollars entering into the economy.

Question: Avtar Khalsa asked for further information about the "I Owe You" program in Wisconsin.

Answer: The VBCs were placed in store fronts and other areas convenient to its veterans. Another significant form of outreach is offering at least five "One-Stop Veterans Center" events for veterans. It will cost approximately \$25,000 for each of the events and one suggested location for an event is the stadium at Northern Arizona University. The event will feature the VA Regional Office, the VA Medical Center, county government agencies, Education, Arizona Department of Veterans' Services, and other services that may be of interest to the veterans.

Mr. Ferguson also pointed out that veterans who access certain VA benefits save money that would have been spent on state social service programs (such as the Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System or the Arizona Department of Economic Security). Veterans frequently seek government jobs and many state agencies qualify for certain veterans education benefits. On-the-Job (OJT) and apprenticeship programs for eligible veterans would have a profound effect on state agencies experiencing recruiting difficulties, such as the Department of Corrections and Dept. of Public Safety.

Gary Yaquinto asked if he could obtain a copy of the state veterans benefit comparison study. Chairman Chorpenning suggested that the spreadsheet would be mailed out to all VTF members by Luella Emmons, Assistant Deputy Director.

Question: Joe Bibich wanted to confirm that the VA recommends one VBC for every 5,000 to 10,000 veterans. He asked why we were only looking to add 40 VBCs, which will only add sufficient counselors to meet the minimum staffing requirements.

Answer: There has not been an increase in the number of VBCs in well over 15 years and this is a manageable number for the increase in staff in a relatively short period of time. Training is a major issue, as new counselors require 3 to 5 years of experience before they are fully functioning.

Question: Joe Bibich asked if the agency has actively recruited volunteer veterans service officers in the state. He felt they would require minimal training in order to process claims.

Answer: Fred Ferguson said that they have sent want ads to various veteran organizations, but they have been very disappointed in the number of applicants received. There is no comparison of a volunteer veterans service officer to the skill and commitment required of a professional, VA-certified VBC. While there are some very hard-working volunteer veterans service officers, they simply do not possess the skills and abilities required without extensive training and experience.

Question: Caryn Walsh asked if there may an opportunity for veterans who are not catastrophically disabled to apply for these types of positions. The jobs may be generated by the Disabled Veteran Outreach Program/ Local Veterans Employment Representative (DVOP/LVER) programs.

Answer: The DVOP/LVER programs are funded by the US Department of Labor. DVOP was a federal program that was essentially the brain child of the American Legion and its counselors are responsible for generating jobs for disabled veterans. Arizona does not have a Department of Labor and the block grant funds were sent to the Department of Economic Security. DES is viewed as the "welfare agency" and veterans are hesitant to request services there. The National Association of State Departments of Veterans Affairs lobbied to assume responsibility for the DVOP/LVER program nationwide, but the effort failed because of American Legion protests. In Arizona, the program needs to be moved from DES to ADVS and Chairman Chorpenning has been researching how to accomplish the transfer.

Recommendations

In the next 10 days, the support staff will extract recommendations from the minutes and present them to the Veterans Task Force members. Chairman Chorpenning asked the members to review the list and provide feedback in preparation of the 11/30/05 meeting. At that time, the VTF will have a strong, meaningful conversation about the recommendations to be published. The final meeting will be held on December 15, 2006. Someone from the Veterans Task Force will provide the recommendations to the Governor following the December meeting.

Call to the Public

Noel Benoist discussed the statutes that provide fishing licenses to disabled veterans. He indicated that the language of the law is contradictory. He also pointed out that the \$800 received by veterans on a VA pension is 30% below federal poverty level. This is not a proper thank you for the veterans who served their country.

Chairman Chorpenning indicated that this is a national issue. The National Association of Governors is the proper forum for this type of suggestion. Governor Napolitano is the President of the Western Governor's Association and she is very interested in both veterans issues and attracting additional revenue into the state.

Jon Skelly, Assistant Director of the VA Regional Office, wanted to clarify that there is no specific deadline for filing a claim with the VA. The length of time between the time of

service and the date of the claim has no bearing on the determination of the claim. Claims are paid retroactively to the date of injury.

Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 3:52 p.m.